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THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER AND STAFF: PROCEDURES FOR EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background. Throughout history, the waging of war has not remained static. Evolving methods of armed conflict have increased the complexity of the battlefield. As the field of battle has expanded, the operational commander has been faced with ever-increasing complexities beyond the directive capabilities of any one man.

On June 15, 1775, the Continental Congress unanimously elected George Washington to command all the continental forces for the defense of American liberty. The following day, the members of Congress proceeded with the business of providing a military staff for Washington's army. This was the beginning of the military staff in the United States.

George Washington had strong convictions in regards to the importance of the military staff..."in forming an army, if a judicious choice is not made of the principal officers and, above all, of the general staff, it can never be rectified thereafter."[1] He devoted much time and thought to staff organization and function, and believed that a strong, well trained staff was indispensable to military success.

Although George Washington's sentiments are certainly as true today as they were in his time, progressive thought on the theory of staffs has been all but ignored. As Major John Vermillion points out in his article The Pillars of Generalship, "Little first-class work has been done to appraise the dynamics of leader-staff interaction."[2]

There is still a debate on whether operational leadership is an art or a science: whether leadership can be learned and applied scientifically, or whether it is an inborn capability. On the one hand, most understand what leadership is supposed to accomplish. On the other hand, most also recognize that there are many ways that leadership can be exercised. There are few definitive answers. However, few would argue that where there are leaders, there are followers--people who are essential to mission accomplishment, whether they act as individuals or in groups. Assuming that operational leaders able to make well informed, rational decisions are an essential component of military effectiveness, it follows that the fundamental group basis of the military staff must be understood and nurtured rather than ignored.

How operational commanders make effective decisions and how these decision are carried out depends in large part on the interaction between the operational commander and his staff. How the operational commander relates to his staff and what he expects from them; and in turn, how the staff perceives and interprets the operational commander's style and expectations can mean the difference between operational success and failure.

Examining the relationship between the operational commander and staff with the aid of existing research on effective group dynamics may provide guidelines to assist today's operational commander and staff to work together better as a decision making team.

CHAPTER II

GROUP DYNAMICS AND DECISION MAKING

Group Dynamics.

> "What remains constant in the most recent research is the recognition that the nature and quality of the interaction between the leader and other group members is a strong determinant of the effectiveness of the group."[1]

What are groups, and why do they exist? First, within the group there are individuals, each of whom brings certain characteristics with him--his experience, abilities, interests, biases--in other words, his personality. The sum total of these individual personalities contributes to the internal dynamics of the group, which in turn creates a "group atmosphere...the pervading mood, tone, or feeling that permeates the group."[2] Second, groups exist to accomplish purposeful actions. They have objectives--ends which are sought--whether these are explicitly stated or only implied. If a group is to be productive it must have goals and they must be understood, for a group unaware of its purpose is like a ship without a rudder.

Collective research on group dynamics and decision making would indicate that a productive group requires a clear understanding of its purposes and goals; a clearly stated objective (for purposes of this paper, an operational objective); an atmosphere where all points of view can be welcome and expressed; achieves a high degree of effective intercommunication; recognizes that the means must be

consistent with the ends; has the ability to detect the rhythms of fatigue, tension and emotional atmosphere and can take measures for their control; has a high degree of solidarity but not to the degree of stifling individuality; and can face and take actions on whatever modifications are needed to keep the group moving in a goal-oriented direction.

Mature groups with a preponderance of the aforementioned dynamics learn to work well together in time. However, most research points to effective leadership within the group as the barometer of a group's success. It is probable that without effective leadership, no group can produce worthwhile action in the direction of its goals.

Leadership and the Operational Commander.

> "Operational leadership is a corporate endeavor, not individual, and it requires full complementarity between the commander and his staff."[3]

Interpretation of the results of leadership research in the military would indicate that leadership refers to interpersonal processes in small groups through which some individuals assist or direct the group toward the completion of group goals. It is a process characterized by participation on the part of the leader and by affective ties such as loyalty and respect between the leader and the follower.

The importance of leadership in military organizations in general is well documented. Its vital contribution in times of crisis and action has been much emphasized, and

military leaders are thought of in terms of drive, toughness and decisive action. Military leadership is a complex phenomenon, and there is probably no one set of leader behaviors, characteristics or skills that fits every single situation. In the military, because of operational requirements in peacetime as well as in crisis situations, different leadership behaviors, styles and characteristics are required for an effective decision making process. Research consensus indicates that a "leader's choice of style is the strongest influencing factor on the amount of success that the group achieves."[4] That style must take into account the operational commander's ability, member ability and member motivation. The style of an operational commander cannot be detached from the situation and what it requires; nor must the operational commander have a single style. Style is not so much something a leader possesses as it is a way of relating to other subordinates in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Most theorists have assumed that differences in the leader's style cause differences in the behavior of subordinates. However, in some instances, leader style may be more a result of subordinate behavior than its cause (a point that will be illustrated in the case study involving Admiral Spruance and his staff at Midway). It is likely that in most cases operational leadership and decision making is somewhat a reciprocal function. In other words, followers, i.e, the staff, influence the operational commander's decision making process as well as vice versa...a dynamic process over time.

There seems to be no doubt that personal characteristics play some role in good operational leadership and effective decision making, although they by no means account entirely for good and effective operational leadership. In Major General Perry Smith's book Taking Charge, the fundamental premise is that leaders count--that those at the top make a difference.[5] He lists twenty key fundamentals that form the basis for his philosophy of leadership, some of which include: trust is essential, as is good communication; strategic vision must be provided by setting goals; the decision making and implementation process must be understood; open-mindedness, listening to all sides, and looking for contrasting viewpoints is essential; and high standards of dignity and integrity must be maintained.[6] In addition to Smith's leadership tenets, most theorists also point to the ability to motivate subordinates as an integral aspect of operational leadership. Since the point has been made that there is no best way to lead, it follows that there is not necessarily a best way to motivate. However, what motivates subordinates depends on a variety of factors, including the subordinate's needs, expectations, attitudes and experiences, as well as the nature of the mission and tasks. This suggests that the operational commander must be sensitive to motivational dynamics on his staff within the context of individual performance and initiative for effective decision making. Awareness of those dynamics will contribute to building a

successful team who provide conscientious input into rational decision making.

The Operational Commander and the Military Staff.

> "The point is that at the operational level, no matter how brilliant the commander, the most glittering conception will go awry if it is not undergirded by the grinding hard work of his staff."[7]

The mission of a military staff--"that immediate circle of assistants who act to translate the commander's operational will into battlefield reality"[8]--is to support the operational commander, acting as a counterweight to balance the operational commander's alternative points of view and courses of action. Every staff is different since operational commanders bring their own leadership style to command and believe their staffs have certain roles to play. However, as has been mentioned previously, style flexibility can be important for the operational commander's decision making process as he takes over a new command. Attention must be paid to the fact that changes in leadership styles can create variations in the staff's decision making performance, as can changes to the decision making performance of a staff when the dynamics change with the arrival or departure of a staff member (a point that will be illustrated in the case study of General Lee and his staff at Gettysburg). Thus, each staff is unique. Still, although leadership style is important, a staff officer who "coordinates properly, acts consistently and establishes credibility"[9] will contribute immeasurably to a successful decision making process and team effort.

All staffs perform the basic functions of procuring information to assist the operational commander in the decision making process, preparing details of his plans, translating his decisions and plans into orders, and then causing the orders to be transmitted to the troops. It is also the staff's duty to bring to the operational commander's attention any matters which require his action or about which he should be informed, make a continuous study of the existing situation and prepare tentative plans for possible future action. Finally, the staff must supervise execution of the plans and orders and ensure that the operational commander's intentions are carried out.

Although unit cohesion on a tactical level is essential to team performance and task accomplishment, the operational commander must guard against making unit cohesion (with regard to the decision making process) on his staff synonymous with a concept which theorist Irving Janis describes as "group think--a concurrence-seeking tendency that has been observed among highly cohesively groups."[10] Essentially, group think refers to the process in which group members become so identified with one another and with the leader that they assume a unanimous view exists when it does not. This false consensus dampens alternative views and feeds a false sense of invulnerability, namely, that the group can do no wrong. Relating this to a possible military decision making scenario, in crisis situations the operational commander and staff are subjected to stresses

that generate a strong need for affiliation in the decision making process. As conformity pressures begin to dominate, striving for unanimity in decision making can foster group think with characteristic reliance on shared rationalizations that can bolster the least objectionable or most expedient alternative. A staff's cohesiveness and loyalty could provide a basis for irrational inputs to the operational commander's decision making due to the unnecessary desire for excessive conformity; or in crisis, time sensitivity. Possible ways to offset this mentality will be discussed in the next section.

Decision Making and the Operational Commander and Staff.

Extensive research on effective decision making by individuals and groups has been extracted by Janis and Mann. Their research has led to the publication of procedural criteria[11], some of which can be applied to the operational commander and staff. For the purposes of this paper, some of these criteria will be adapted to the operational commander/staff relationship, and broadened to facilitate incorporation of effective group dynamics, and some essential military leadership qualities conducive to good staff work.

For effective decisions to be made, the operational commander, in concert with his staff, should accomplish the following four procedures to the best of his ability:

1. Appraise the operational mission. The operational

commander must provide the operational vision which is based on strategic policy goals when appraising the operational mission. He must clearly understand the purpose and goals of his mission within the aforementioned context, and then be able to clearly convey them to his staff if effective planning is to take place. This implies familiarity with his staff, their interactive dynamics and inherent strengths and weaknesses. The operational commander should facilitate problem-solving, but let the staff solve the problems. As General Patton once said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."[12] To do this, the operational commander should be "impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset...limit briefings to unbiased statements about the scope of the problem and the limitations of available resources, without advocating specific proposals".[13] This is an important anti-group think procedure.

2. Thoroughly canvas a wide range of alternative courses of action. Due to today's technology, command decisions may be more centralized but still depend entirely on honest inputs. Good communication--going on all the time, as a two way process between the operational commander and his staff--is essential. That means the operational commander must be open to all possible courses of action, and provide an atmosphere where all points of view are welcome and expressed.

3. Carefully weigh the costs and risks of each alternative. Both the operational commander and staff must ensure that the means are consistent with the ends, and that every alternative has been critically appraised. To ensure that high priority is given to airing all objections and doubts, the operational commander should assign some member(s) of his staff the sole function of "critical evaluator"[14], another Janis anti-group think concept, to counteract the spontaneous group pressures that give rise to a premature or expedient consensus. The operational commander must fully support the role of the devil's advocate, but also regulate it so that prolonged debates and volatile emotions do not adversely impact, unduly influence or have a detrimental effect on the staff's morale, working relations or decision making process.

4. Implement, continually reevaluate and provide feedback for the selected course of action, modifying the operational plan as necessary. This assumes that the staff has provided sufficient information with critically appraised alternative courses of action so that the operational commander can make rational and (presumably) effective decisions. However, the fog of war will often cloud the situation and make even the best operational plans go awry. The staff must continually be on top of the plan's execution, evaluating accomplishment of its goals, and maintaining flexibility and foresight to either minimize the effects of unforeseen problems or be able to provide the commander timely recommendations to move the plan in another direction.

These four procedures will now be examined in terms of two operational case studies -- General Lee and his staff at the Battle of Gettysburg; and Admiral Spruance and his staff at the Battle of Midway -- to demonstrate how these procedures could have more effectively contributed to rational and effective operational decision making.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL LEE AND HIS STAFF AT THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

General Robert E. Lee has been hailed as a master of the art of leadership, and probably the most capable Civil War general. By all accounts, he was a masterful tactician as evidenced by his string of victories against an army superior in numbers and combat power up through Chancellorsville. However, some critics have called L offensive strategy into the North questionable at best--both as a viable means of attaining the South's policy aims and also in regard to its operational practicality, particularly the South's logistical ability to sustain offensive campaigns in the North. However, Gettysburg was Lee's idea and matched his commitment to the offensive and his belief that the South needed to pursue the military defeat of the North.[1] The actual execution of the Gettysburg campaign is replete with both operational and tactical failures. What began as a skirmish between two small units, fate escalated into what has arguably been called the greatest, most decisive battle of the war.

In Lee's time, there was no provision by law for a general staff as exists today. Although he had a personal staff to see to legal and administrative functions, his general staff was in actuality his tactical commanders. This was not a staff devoted to strategic or operational planning. It was a staff who had confidence in Lee and his

warfighting ability, and were responsible for executing his plan tactically. Let us now generally examine interaction between Lee and his staff in terms of the four decision making procedures.

1. Appraise the operational mission. Lee never did his operational planning by an "instinctive, sudden impulse. Rather he painfully and studiously labored in planning all of this battles and campaigns, weighing everything, even the smallest detail."[2] However, he made a spontaneous decision to stay at Gettysburg--a serious mistake in and of itself in the operational art arena, since he did not decide when and where to fight his battle--and go on the offensive. He then had to ponder the best way to carry it out:

> "From the close of the first day's fighting until late that night, he discussed battle plans with his generals. He held no council of war, nor did he meet all of them together at one time, even informally. Instead, he himself rode out to consult with each corps commander and his chief subordinates, and he saw other officers individually or in groups at his headquarters."[3]

Although Lee canvassed his generals for their opinions, he was used to formulating the operational plan by himself, trusting his generals to implement his desires on the battlefield. Prior to Gettysburg, he relied most heavily on "Stonewall" Jackson, his right-hand man who was lost at Chancellorsville. Jackson was replaced by General James Longstreet, a capable commander more disposed to the strategy of an "offensive defense"--to invade then force the North to attack Lee's army[4]--than he was to Lee's offensive

strategy. Lee was also faced with new corps commanders, inexperienced in their positions and unused to Lee's leadership style--"it was (Lee's) policy to make careful plans with his corps commanders and then leave to them the duty of modifying and carrying them out to the best of their abilities".[5] This presumes Lee would intervene only when he saw his plans going awry. However, Lee could not have intervened in every instance since he could not be everywhere at once. This leadership style also led to Lee waging the battle at Gettysburg without intelligence or reconnaissance since Lee had given General Stuart--his eyes and ears--discretion to conduct reconnaissance with no specific orders as to when to return.[6] Closer supervision and more direct orders to an inexperienced staff could have compensated for what turned out to be confusion in combat. In this example of the operational commander/staff relationship, Lee conveyed his goals to his staff, but since he did all the planning with specific tactical maneuvers and timing in mind, he should have been much more clear and direct with his new staff about exactly what he wanted done and when.

2. Thoroughly canvas a wide range of alternative courses of action. As discussed above, Lee made the decisions and individually discussed them with his staff when it was his desire to do so, providing a limited atmosphere where points of view could be expressed. However, to what extent he seriously considered the objections and alternatives of his

staff to his plan can only be a matter of speculation since his plans were the ones implemented.

3. Carefully weigh the costs and risks of each alternative. Again, to what extent Lee listened to his "critical evaluator", Longstreet, is uncertain. That Longstreet challenged him is certain, and there are many who believe that if Lee had considered Longstreet's advice, the outcome of Gettysburg might have been different. However, as the operational commander, Lee was entirely within his rights to do it his way. He did, and obviously felt that the ends justified the risks and potential costs of those risks.

4. Implement, continually reevaluate and provide feedback for the selected course of action, modifying the operational plan as necessary. The fog of war and confusion of combat limited the timely ability of Lee and his staff to influence the overall conduct of each day's battles as they occurred. It seems a complete reevaluation of the plans would have been in order especially after the faulty execution of the plans on the second day of the battle. However, Lee did not call his staff together to confer with him prior to day three, which left him unable to spell out exactly what he wanted.[7] Although that was not the way he did things, it again left execution of his plans to the discretion of his generals--something they had not demonstrated the ability to do to Lee's satisfaction on days one and two.

In conclusion, Lee's failure in the Gettysburg campaign

resulted in large part from his apparent confusion as to which level of war he was fighting. At the operational level, he made all the plans with limited input from his staff and virtually no intelligence. However, he then switched his focus to the tactical level, but provided no specific tactical directives to his generals. This potentially confusing leadership worked when there were generals on his staff with experience working for Lee; but it failed him at Gettysburg.

CHAPTER IV

ADMIRAL SPRUANCE AND HIS STAFF AT THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

It has been said that no command decision that Admiral Nimitz made in connection with the battle of Midway was more important or far-reaching than his selection of Admiral Spruance to head Task Force Sixteen..."Spruance had excellent judgement...(he) thought things through very carefully after a thorough examination of all the facts, and then, when he decided to strike, struck hard...bold but not to the point of being reckless...(with) a certain caution, too, and a feeling for the battle.[1]

Most historians assert that the battle was won as a result of breaking the Japanese code.[2] Others will say that luck played its part operationally as well. Either way, most military historians have called the battle of Midway one of the decisive battles of the Pacific campaign.

Admiral Spruance took over Task Force Sixteen and Admiral Halsey's staff two days prior to getting underway for Midway. He took only his Flag Lieutenant with him from his COMCRUDIV Five staff. Although not an aviator, Spruance told one of his own staff officers that he was not concerned about commanding a carrier task force.[3] A member of the staff Spruance inherited from Halsey said, "the staff was naturally sorry to lose Halsey, but Spruance was our new boss and he expected us to carry on as before. We did our jobs for him as we did for Halsey."[4] However, by biographer

Thomas B. Buell's account, Halsey's aviators were "uneasy about going into the battle of their lives led by a stranger"[5]. According to Buell, Spruance's staff was loyal to Halsey, and ill at ease with the thought of going to sea with a boss they knew little about.

Spruance's new Chief of Staff was Captain Miles Browning, an acknowledged naval air warfare expert. He was also reputedly a "mediocre chief of staff...(whose) erratic, irascible behavior demoralized the staff officers... not an administrator...yet Browning was the man upon whom Spruance was expected to depend for advice."[6] Let us now generally examine interaction between Spruance and his staff in terms of the four decision making procedures.

1. Appraise the operational mission. Fortunately, the command philosophies of Nimitz and Spruance were compatible. Nimitz's philosophy was to "tell the subordinate commander what you wanted done, give him the necessary resources, provide as much information as you could about the enemy, and then let him alone so he could accomplish the mission."[7] Spruance believed that the "commander responsible for accomplishing the mission should develop the necessary plans; the proper role of the next highest command echelon was to establish the objective and to suggest how the objective might be achieved."[8] Spruance clearly understood his written orders--to hold Midway--but also understood his verbal orders from Nimitz--that preserving the carriers was more important than saving

Midway.[9] The written orders were understood by everyone up and down the chain of command. Spruance left the tactical planning to his tactical commander, Admiral Fletcher, and the day to day running of his task force was done by his own staff.

2. Thoroughly canvas a wide range of alternative courses of action. Spruance assumed that Halsey's staff was a competent, cohesive staff, and did not seem predisposed to involve himself with getting to know how they operated when he took over. Perhaps he felt compelled to assume their decision making and implementation ability because of their air warfare expertise and string of previous mission successes. Whatever the reason, Spruance's "hands off" leadership style was certainly influenced by his assumptions about this staff. Good communication was assumed, as was the fact that all courses of action were critically appraised. However, in actuality, his staff did not have the requisite glue to hold them together, and would eventually fail him during the course of the battle because of the fog of war and the lack of staff leadership from the chief of staff.

3. Carefully weigh the costs and risks of each alternative. Spruance has been quoted as saying, "all operations are like women going to shop, for you must ask these two questions: What is it going to cost you and what is it worth to you?"[10] He, himself, always measured the cost/risk ratio for each operation. However, Spruance

confronted numerous instances where it seemed his staff failed to examine the costs and risks. A good example is Browning's miscalculation of payloads and ranges of a bomber strike he advocated to Spruance. When the mission pilots confronted Browning and Spruance with evidence of shoddy planning that would guarantee mission failure, Spruance sided with his aviators, having finally lost all confidence in his chief of staff.

4. Implement, continually reevaluate and provide feedback for the selected course of action, modifying the operational plan as necessary. It is here that Spruance's staff completely broke down--from Browning's failure to provide Point Option for his returning aviators resulting in the loss of many aircraft and lives; to the staff's inability to provide Spruance with any acceptable courses of action during the course of the battle. According to Buell:

> "The staff collapsed. Midway was their first test of sustained combat against powerful forces. Their earlier raids against weakly defended islands had not prepared them for the demands of a fleet action. They were a free-wheeling staff, accustomed to impulsive decisions and hasty plans. Before Midway they had muddled through without any major mistakes. The staff officers were capable and willing, but erratic Browning provided neither leadership nor cohesion. Thus the staff became progressively more confused and disoriented as the battle progressed, unable to cope with the need for disciplined planning and the coordination of complex task force operations."[11]

In conclusion, Spruance never publicly or privately recounted the failures of his staff, apparently feeling it would be prejudicial to good order and discipline. However, as the operational commander, Spruance, himself could have

done more to preclude those failures. If he had attempted to assess the dynamics of his staff in the beginning, watched their interaction, and provided more specific direction when it was obvious his chief of staff was unreliable, perhaps the staff could have been more effective. Spruance himself said, "You go in with a good plan and hope that it will work. Then the fog of battle sets in, and you are never quite sure what is going on. But you must have faith, and much depends on luck."[12] He is very fortunate that lady luck was on his side at Midway.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As has been illustrated by the preceding case studies, the operational commander has a major influence on the conduct of a campaign. It is equally obvious, however, that his influence is equally important on the conduct of his staff. The role of the staff is a crucial one. In the case of Lee and his staff at Gettysburg, Lee became directly involved on the tactical level, losing sight of the operational problem; did not acknowledge the shortcomings of his corps commanders; and failed to coordinate the efforts of his army. In the case of Spruance and his staff at Midway, Spruance did not correctly assess the decision making and implementation capabilities of his staff, and even when faced with their liabilities, took no measure of control to direct their efforts. In both cases, even if the operational planning had been coordinated to perfection, faulty execution lost the battle for Lee, and nearly resulted in disaster for Spruance. "Know thy staff"--their capabilities and limitations--should have been at the top of the priority list for both Lee and Spruance. Only then could they have more realistically depended upon the effective implementation of their operational decisions.

Effective operational commanders are decision makers who have vision, know how to set and articulate goals, and can lead their staff to strive successfully for those

goals. Although no single type of operational leadership style can guarantee success, by understanding the dynamics of, and following the four basic procedures for effective decision making--appraise the operational mission; thoroughly canvas a wide range of alternative courses of action; carefully weigh the costs and risks of each alternative; implement, continually reevaluate and provide feedback for the selected course of action, modifying the operational plan as necessary--the operational commander and his staff might have more long term success in making effective, rational decisions. The ideal operational commander/staff relationship is one between a "continually conceptualizing commander and his staff.[1]

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